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Sosa on the normativity of belief

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Abstract Sosa takes epistemic normativity to be kind of performance normativity: a belief is correct because a believer sets a positive value to truth as an aim and performs aptly and adroitly. I object to this teleological picture that beliefs are not performances, and that epistemic reasons or beliefs cannot be balanced against practical reasons. Although the picture fits the nature of inquiry, it does not fit the normative nature of believing, which has to be conceived along distinct lines.

Keywords Belief · Normativity · Knowledge · Truth · Sosa

In his beautifully crafted book (Sosa 2011, henceforth KFW), Ernest Sosa takes epistemic normativity to be a special case of performance normativity, and invites us to understand belief as a kind of performance which has to pass three dimensions of evaluation to become knowledge: when it reaches its aim (when it is true, or accurate), when it is competent (or adroit) and when it is accurate because of this competence (when it is apt). When knowledge becomes reflective we know "full well". On his view, the correctness of belief is explained as the instantiation of a teleological structure, and epistemic normativity is characterized in axiological terms. Belief is aimed at truth, but this aim is not intrinsic: it could be directed towards other goals. It is the specific kind of endeavor that an agent undertakes which makes it a belief and which puts it on the right track on its way to knowledge. I disagree with Sosa both about the nature of belief and about the normativity which

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is involved in it. If belief were a performance directed towards an aim, this aim would not be exclusive and we would be able to weigh our epistemic reasons against our practical reasons for believing. Although I can only suggest this view here, I hold that the normativity of belief is not teleological but deontic: belief is governed by a norm of truth.

Sosa's account of epistemic normativity is governed by three main ideas. The first is that the normativity that is attached to belief is dependent upon the kind of normativity that is attached to knowledge: beliefs do not have any epistemic normative status independently from their capacity to lead to knowledge. The second is that the fundamental normative concepts are value concepts such as *being valuable* or *good*, not concepts of a deontic kind such as *ought*, *may* or *must*. The third is that belief is a kind of performance, directed at a certain aim. Hence what is evaluated is the performance of an agent who, by aiming at truth, forms beliefs more or less aptly and adroitly, or fails to do so. Hence epistemic normativity, both for belief and for knowledge, is a kind of performance normativity. As the metaphor of the archer who shoots with his arrows at the target indicates, the whole picture is teleological, both in the sense that belief has literally an aim or a goal, and in the sense in which the agent has in some sense an intention to reach that aim (the word *intentio* in Latin means *trying to reach*).

On this picture, an epistemic performance is valuable in so far as it achieves its goal and manifests the competence of the believer, hence in so far as it reaches the knowledge level. Thus the value of knowledge is greater than the value of true belief. But what kind of value is proper to true belief? Clearly it is the value which is attached to a performance being accurate: a shot which does not hit its target cannot be a good shot at all, even though it can manifest competence and skill in other respects. There is value in performing well, but there is more value in being successful while performing well. Nevertheless truth cannot be valuable in itself, for otherwise trivial or idle truths would matter. So the aim of truth has normally to be formulated as believing *only* truths, and not *all* truths. To search for truth for truth's sake does not make any sense, as Sosa (2001, 2003) has long argued: the value of truth cannot be transcendent, but has to be relative to a specific domain of inquiry. So the value, hence the normativity of belief must reside mainly in the *believing* itself, hence in the performance, and not simply in the object or goal of the performance, which is the truth of its content. Sosa's account of the normativity of belief, however, encounters several difficulties.

The first concerns the nature of belief. A performance account of belief, although it helps us differentiate knowledge from belief, tends to blur the difference between belief and other doxastic attitudes. Some attitudes such as believing, judging, conjecturing, guessing, suspecting, doubting, etc. are non-factive. Others such as knowing, perceiving, seeing, hearing, realizing, etc. are factive. Factive attitudes have contents which cannot fail to be true. Non-factive attitudes, by contrast can fail to be true. Why is this? It seems that it has to do with the fact that when one believes, conjectures, guesses that P, one tries to reach the aim which is true, and one can do it more or less well, whereas when one knows, one has reached the aim. This lends support to Sosa's view that believing is a kind of performance, but we then lose what is specific to belief among the other attitudes. Sosa could answer

that it is not an objection, but grist to his own mill, since not only judgments, conjectures and guesses seem to be aimed at truth, are species of belief, hence of performances.

But although guessing or judging can plausibly be classified among performances, is belief a kind of performance? Does belief fall into one of the categories that are distinguished by Aristotle's famous division of verbs into movements (*kineseis*) and accomplishments (*energeiai*), refined by Kenny (1963) and Vendler (1967) into activities (*running*, *pushing*), accomplishments (*run a mile*, *paint a picture*), achievements (*recognize*, *find*, *fatten*), or states (*desire*, *want*, *love*). A performance belongs clearly to the class of accomplishments, which have a beginning and an end in which they result. Beliefs, however, do not have clear beginnings or endings: it does not make sense to say that one starts believing that *p* at one point and that one has reached belief at another point, although this may be true of belief formations or acquisitions. On many accounts, beliefs are *states*, which endure and persist, and not performances or activities. They differ, in that respect, from judgments, guesses or conjectures, which, at least in some senses, can fall under the category of activities. There is a sense in which one can aim at producing a true judgment about *p*, make up one's mind as to whether *p*, and proceed to assent to *p* through some kind of act of the will. Similarly there is a sense in which someone who guesses whether *p* aims, intentionally, at having a true guess. Sosa talks of epistemic *agency*. The usual criteria of agency are the presence of reasons (an agent A φ *s* if he has a reason to φ), which involve at least intentions (he agent intends to φ) which cause the action (the agent φ *s* because he has that reason), the exercise of a certain degree of freedom, the presence of trying (the agent can try to φ), and, according to some accounts, a distinctive phenomenology (there is a feeling of action) and a sense of authorship of one's acts (O'Brien 2007). All of three criteria apply perfectly to an archer bowing his arrow and aiming a hitting a target with his arrow, and they apply to some mental actions such as guessing and judging. But do these criteria apply to beliefs? Beliefs indeed can and do have reasons, but these are epistemic reasons, not practical reasons. Clearly beliefs in the sense of attitudes with a specific content, cannot be the object of intentions, unless one subscribes to a form of doxastic voluntarism. As just noted, one cannot try to believe in the sense in which one can try to judge or to guess. Although some argue to the contrary (Bayne and Montague 2011), it is not clear that beliefs have a distinctive phenomenology or are associated with a sense of agency. Most of these criteria, however, apply without difficulty to beliefs as commitments or as acts of acceptance that one takes in the course of inquiry. So is Sosa talking about inquiry rather than about knowledge when he talks about belief and knowledge? Attitudes such as committing oneself to *p*, accepting that *p* or taking *p* for granted or as a working hypothesis are typically reflective; so when Sosa takes belief to be a kind of performance is he not really talking about reflective or meta-level, and not about first-order knowledge? He cannot be suspected to mix up the two levels, since he is very clear about their distinction and about the fact that the notion of performance applies not only to reflective level knowledge but also to first-order belief and knowledge. He is equally clear about the fact that *withholding* belief, although it would seem prima facie to be a non-performance, can actually be

counted as a second-order performance, given that in these cases the epistemic agent has a further, second-order aim: avoiding failure (KFW, pp. 4–7). Sosa (2007, p. 89) also makes the distinction between knowledge and inquiry (KFW, p. 30) and between the values which pertain to knowledge and belief on the one hand and those which pertain to intellectual ethics on the other. So we must not confuse first-order performance normativity—with second-order performance normativity. But it remains that Sosa's account of belief performance as performances fits better the second-order mode of believing.

If I interpret Sosa correctly, the claim that beliefs are kinds of performances has to be taken seriously for first-level belief and knowledge, i.e. at the animal knowledge level, and not only at reflective or second-order level. But in what does it consist? Sosa admits that there is a purely functional sense of performance, which can apply to machines, devices, biological organs, although it does not apply to the human level (KFW, pp. 3–4). Presumably there can be aiming at truth in his purely functional sense: for instance the function of a biological cognitive organ, such as an eye, or of an artificial device, such as an electronic eye, can be to aim at true information or "beliefs". The cognitive system of a human can aim at truth subintentionally (Velleman 2000, p. 253). So "animal" performance in belief and knowledge must be situated between this low-level functioning and the reflective level. Sosa comes closer to characterising this intermediate level when he tells us that the exercise of epistemic agency can be rational, in the sense of belief being held for motivating reasons, without involving a conscious deliberation or any act of the will: "One can form beliefs rationally even if not deliberately, not voluntarily, nor even consciously"(KFW, p. 19). But to what extent can such beliefs manifest epistemic agency and how can they be performances while not being intentionally aimed at truth? In reply to an imaginary opponent, Sosa admits that a number of our beliefs can be formed of sustained without any concern for truth or for epistemic reasons, such as bad faith beliefs or self-deceptive ones. Are such beliefs performances aimed at truth? By definition no, since they do not involve any *endeavor* or *pursuit* towards truth, even though they can be *motivated* or caused by a desire for truth (after all the cuckolded husband desires to know the truth about his wife; KFW, pp. 20–21). Sosa's account of beliefs as performances is thus confronted to what Shah (2003) calls the "teleologist's dilemma" which he ascribes to any theorist who holds that the normativity of belief is due to the descriptive relation between truth and belief (that of a goal which the believer aims at reaching). On the one hand, the teleologist must allow the disposition that constitutes aiming at truth to be so weak as to allow cases in which beliefs are caused by such non-evidential processes as wishful thinking; on the other hand the teleologist must strengthen the disposition to aim at truth so that it excludes the influence of non truth-directed considerations. The problem is that there is no common description of beliefs as performances directed towards truth which can apply to both the weak and the strong disposition if belief is thus described in intentional or teleological terms.

A second main difficulty concerns the structure of reasons for belief. If belief is the more or less apt performance of a believer who aims at truth as a goal, then this goal must be such that it can be weighed or balanced against other goals. But

typically—as a matter of experience, when we deliberate consciously about what to believe—beliefs our reasons for believing are epistemic or evidential reasons, not practical reasons. There is here a clear difference between belief and other attitudes, such as guessing, for when one guesses it may be perfectly rational to disregard evidence and guess quickly in order to win a quiz game for instance (Owens 2003). This absence of weighing seems to be more than a phenomenological fact of doxastic deliberation. It seems that our reasons have to be to be *intrinsically* or *necessarily* of the epistemic kind. Epistemic reasons or belief are "exclusive" (Steglich-Petersen 2009). Practical reasons for belief are not "the right kind of reason" (Hieronymi 2005). Certainly this is not true in the descriptive or causal sense, for the cases were our beliefs are caused by practical concerns are legion (KFW, pp. 28–34). It has to be true in the sense of conceptual necessity, or of normative necessity, if the performance account is supposed to express the conditions under which a belief is *correct*. But the teleological analysis has to deny this: it says that it is not in virtue of a normative fact or in virtue of some conceptual necessity that a believer aims at truth, but in virtue of the descriptive psychological fact—an intention—that he has elected truth has an aim, and in virtue of the fact that truth is thereby to count as the main value in this circumstance or domain. The teleologist about epistemic normativity has to deny that one cannot rationally opt for another aim than an epistemic one in believing. He has to deny that one cannot, in the sense of having a rational motivation or in the conceptual sense, weigh distinct aims for believing. And Sosa actually does reject this. To his imaginary opponent who objects that epistemic and practical reasons are dimensions which are "as independent as are an ellipse's eccentricity and the area that it bounds", Sosa replies that "that cannot be right" since "after all people are *admired* for their *disinterested* search for truth, despite strong temptations and social pressures that might bear on their inquiry" (KFW, p. 30).

Now this claim is certainly true of *inquiry*, since inquiry is the process whereby one sets oneself an aim—truth or knowledge—and takes various decisions about how to reach this aim. In the course of deliberating about whether to believe something, one can, as Sosa rightly insists, suspend judgment, in order to avoid failure when evidence is insufficient. Or can also decide not to inquire further on a matter, for lack of time or resources. And one can even accept hypotheses that one takes to be false although relevant to the topic, for the sake of reasoning or for seeing where they can lead. One could even, in cases of urgency or of danger, prefer to hold a belief that one takes to be beneficial or comforting. And one can certainly be blamed or praised for these actions. But is Sosa's claim true of *belief* itself? Cases were, for instance one deliberates about forming a belief about a subject matter rather than forming no belief are indeed cases where we balance the aim of truth against other aims (Steglich-Petersen 2009). But are these cases were *the very process of formation of the belief* is subject to a balance between epistemic and practical aims? Not at all. Inquiry is a process which has an intentional aim, truth, and which is composed of a number of individual performances which also have an aim, in general truth, but sometimes, not. But it does not follow from this aimed character of inquiry that the beliefs which are formed as a result of inquiry are themselves performances, which could be motivated rationally by reasons other than

epistemic (Sullivan-Bissett and Noordhof 2013).[1] Sosa seems to recognize this, when he reminds us that an agent who looks "disinterestedly" for truth can be affected unconsciously by his desire to believe something for reasons of control, but forbears doing so, motivated by the desire to believe correctly. He says that here the subject does not take any positive action of forming the belief, and lets his epistemic competence work, through a process that is not an action. If a believer, like a river pilot, sets his belief system on the default mode, beliefs are formed through no decisions (KFW, p. 32). I fully concur. But then here is no more aiming at truth in the sense of a performance for first-order belief than there is aiming on the part of the river pilot when he lets he boat follow its trajectory. So why does Sosa not accept that the right or wrong kind of reason for belief is a matter of conceptual necessity?

One further difficulty that Sosa's performance account of normativity encounters is that a number of normative judgments that we pass on beliefs are of a deontic unrestricted general form, and not an evaluation of the skill or competence of the agent in a particular domain. When we disagree with someone else's belief or claim to know, or in the way it has been formed, for instance when we say "This is false", or "You ought not to believe this" or "You should have known", we do not disagree over a particular competence or a particular performance, but with respect to general, cross-domain, features of the belief—indeed its epistemic features. Such judgments have typically a deontic form (Grimm 2009). So why not accept the view which is in many ways rival to the teleological account of epistemic normativity, namely the thesis that the correctness of a belief is due to the existence of a norm governing belief? (Wedgwood 2002) The obvious candidate is that belief is subject to a norm of truth: a belief is correct if and only if it is true, and one ought to believe that *p* if an only if *p*. In taking this correctness condition as a norm for the concept of belief rather than as a teleological principle governing the performance of the believer, one can explain why this norm can apply to both cases were belief in not a conscious aim of the believer and to cases were he deliberates consciously. A conceptual or constitutive norm need not be explicitly entertained by the believer, and it can regulate both beliefs where our use of the concept of belief is tacit (as in self-deception) and those where it is explicit (as in deliberation about what to believe).

The objections to such a view, however, are many. Some take the same form as those which can be addressed to a transcendent aim of truth: the norm seems to

[1] McHugh (2012) suggests counterexamples to exclusivity with cases of suspension of judgment. But his cases are not cases of belief, but of acceptance. And they do not defeat the normative claims associated to exclusivity. They only put pressure on the psychological fact of exclusivity. But normativists about belief have never claimed that non evidential or non-epistemic reasons cannot occur and play a role in belief formation as a matter of psychological fact or causally. What they object to is with the normative thesis of non-exclusivity. Nobody denies that non evidential reasons are sometimes motivating reasons (in the causal) sense for beliefs. Even McHugh's claim that such cases are cases of direct belief motivated by non-evidential considerations is dubious: these are cases where you believe that it *would be good for you* to believe *p*, i.e. cases of attitude based reasons, not content based reasons. And McHugh's claim that it cannot be an *acceptance* is implausible. The cases he describes are indeed cases of acceptance rather than belief!

impose on us impossible obligations, thus violating the principle that *ought* implies *can* (Steglich-Petersen 2006; Bykvist and Hattiangadi 2007). Others have to do with the implausibly prescriptive character of the norm, when the *oughts* of belief are taken as obligations (Glüer and Wikforss 2009). Prescriptions, it is argued, about what one ought to believe when the only norm is truth do not make sense of the idea that a norm has to guide and regulate our belief formation. I can here neither deal here with these nor suggest my preferred version of the view, which takes the norm to be a *conceptual* norm and not a guiding one (Shah 2003; Engel to appear), but these objections can be overcome. The most obvious objection, from Sosa's point of view, is that even if one takes epistemic normativity to consist in the sole feature of accuracy—truth—of a belief, all the other features which contribute to our evaluation of the correctness of the belief—the internal factors of the *believing*—disappear, and we are just left with the bare external correctness of the belief *content*, which is truth.[2] Clearly the normative account would be deficient if it reduced epistemic normativity to accuracy—truth. Epistemic normativity also belongs to the evidence that the believer has to have in order to believe correctly. This suggests that the norm of truth has also to be a norm of knowledge, as a number of people have argued and as actually Sosa himself seems ready to argue too:

> Knowledge is the norm of belief, i.e. to believe that p – to be disposed to affirm that p - in full epistemic propriety or worth, requires knowing that p(KFW: 49).

I fully agree (Engel 2005; Smithies 2012).

It actually seems to me that Sosa can accept a normative account of epistemic normativity, provided he accepts a sharper distinction than the one he is prepared to make between belief and knowledge, on the one hand, and inquiry on the other.

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[2] I take up Thomson's (2005, pp. 81–82) useful distinction between external correctness and internal correctness.

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